

BLIZZARD OF '49, WYOMING PUBLIC TELEVISION ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Speaker 1: Almost ready?

Speaker 2: Yep, we're ready.

Speaker 1: Okay. Dan, just state your name for the camera.

Dan: Daniel Kinneman.

Speaker 1: Okay. From my research, the storm started, I don't know if this was true in Rawlins, but the storm started on January 2nd, which was a Sunday, and didn't quit until the following Wednesday. Does that ...

Dan: That sounds about right. I have January 4 through the 6th. But it could be anywhere in that area, I think, yeah.

Speaker 1: Right. Right. You weren't in Rawlins at the time. You were over in Cheyenne with your dad. Isn't that right?

Dan: No. No. I didn't go over to Cheyenne until ... Well, it had been after ... I would say about February 13th, 14th.

Speaker 1: Oh, okay.

Dan: Dad had been up in Sheraton, Elmer Kinneman, and he was a Wyoming state legislator. He got sick and took some penicillin, which he turned out to be allergic to. He came back to Rawlins and just sat, trying to recuperate. I guess there wasn't a whole much you could do except wait for the effects to wear off. Well, by the time that he was well, the roads were closed. The railroad was shut down. The National Guard sent an airplane for him. He took me back with him. Usually this was going to be maybe a weekend visit. But because everything remained closed, I was there far too long for his liking. [00:02:00] He made sure I was on the first bus coming to Rawlins. I imagine I was there 6 days or so.

Speaker 1: In Cheyenne.

Dan: In Cheyenne, right.

Speaker 1: Do you have a recollection of it being terribly snowy in Cheyenne?

Dan: No. I think Cheyenne, if it had been there, the storm had been there, it must have passed way before that. Like you said, the first snow was in early January.

Then that was followed by one about February 7th to the 11th. The dates are approximately. And the 14th to the 17th. When I mean snowstorm, they were regular blizzards. The schools were closed at least 3 times in that period of time. Other things that happened, we had passenger trains stranded in Rawlins. The first time, 250 passengers, and the last time, 650. At one time, the Red Cross was feeding 1,700 meals a day for stranded passengers and otherwise. The Army came in and we had 80 soldiers housed in the Masonic Temple. These were people that had ... The soldiers were here to operate the bulldozer, and they had weasels, which was an all-terrain [00:04:00] type vehicle that the Army had at the time. And other duties. I don't know, maybe some of the pilots might have had to stay there during blizzards when they couldn't operate.

It ended up the UP, the railroad, had been snowed in for 14 days, which was the longest period that they'd been shut down in their history. There were ... The ramifications of it were ... There was ... UP built 20 miles of snow fences in the period just during the blizzard. Some of those had to be just built on top of the snowbanks over their old snow fences. The trains were snowed in, mainly in the later period, west of Rawlins. Some of the engines were practically covered. I think probably you have photos of some of those that were practically covered. The trains, it seemed like the antelope must have gone to the railroad so that they could move about. Evidently, why they couldn't move freely, so they tried the railroad, and when the train did come, why it would kill quite a few [00:06:00] that were all in a herd. They estimated that the railroad killed 400 to 850 of them. I think this is probably mostly west of Rawlins.

We had an air lift of C47 planes of the Air Force that came in, and they would have hay, and they'd go over to where there would be stranded livestock and kick out the hay and feed them. That started in about July 25th. I think it ended at about the time that the storm did, the effects of the storm, in about February 17th.

Speaker 1: Let's back up. You said July 25th. I think you meant January 25th.

Dan: January 25th.

Speaker 1: Let's back it up and say the C47s were dropping - started dropping hay around January ...

Dan: Okay.

Speaker 1: That's okay.

Dan: The C47s were dropping hay around January 25th, and I think they lasted until about February 17th, when practically the effects of all the snowstorm had ended. They had convoys. The convoys started ... Let me back that up.

Speaker 1: Sure.

Dan: The airlift started in February 8th. Let's see, do you want me to rephrase that all over again.

Speaker 1: Yeah.

Dan: Airlift of hay and feed started to the livestock out in the country that couldn't get to otherwise, [00:08:00] on February 8th. That continued until the storm was over, about February 17th. Convoys of trucks, usually following a bulldozer, started about the 25th of January. They also continued to February 17th, and sometimes maybe a little bit later. They would bring feed. Sometimes they would have to bring food to the sheep herders, fuel for their stoves, and so on and so forth. They went north, south, east, and west.

Highways were closed off and on. The worst part would be the Rawlins Casper Road, which was closed at Nine Mile Hill. There's pictures of a Jeep being parked there where a rotary had been, and the snowdrifts were maybe 2 or 3 feet above the Jeep. See, at 1 time, Rawlins had 17 bulldozers operating out of it, maybe 2 on the Hanna Elk Mountain Road, a whole bunch on the North Road. They even had to have them operate in town to clear the streets. Then in addition, they had weasels and some patrols. They were brought in by a train, [00:10:00] or some of them by train during 1 of the lulls between the storms. Some came by convoy about the same time.

Speaker 1: I have a quick question. You were talking about all these passengers stranded here in Rawlins on the trains. Were they put up in area hotels, or did they stay on trains, or do you not know?

Dan: I don't think I know, but I think they stayed on the trains. I think the 1,700 meals that we were talking about was mainly for them.

Speaker 1: Red Cross supplied those?

Dan: Yeah, Red Cross. It got so bad in Rawlins that the bars were not selling packaged goods, because they wanted to keep what liquor they could for their shots, you know, for their regular drinks. That's bad.

In Hanna, they had trains that were stranded. The UP brought in 8 buses from Cheyenne to take them back to Cheyenne, and then I would suppose forward

them on down to Denver, and then on the Denver and Rio Grande going other places. In Sinclair, they laid off employees because they weren't able to ship their product for 11 days. So they had too much product and not enough work.
[00:12:00]

Speaker 1: I found some photos of the gas pumps at Sinclair just drifted in.

Dan: Yeah, entirely. I think they got quite a bit. It wasn't the depth of the snow that was so bad. It was the wind that drifted everything. There were 44 cars of hogs in Rawlins yards, about 5,000 of them, of which 600 of them perished, died of exposure. One of the last things that we ever hear of the winter of '49 was in September, many months afterwards, that they were digging a line and they found a snowdrift still there under a layer of cinders. In it, they found a well-preserved frozen hog, in September.

Speaker 1: My gosh.

Speaker 2: Scoot back just a bit. Scoot back just a bit, Tom. There we go.

Speaker 1: Was I in the shot?

Speaker 2: Just leaning in a little bit.

Speaker 1: Okay. Good, okay. Can you describe the severity of the drifting in the homes in Rawlins, and maybe the Ideal Motel?

Dan: Well, the houses on the south side of Rawlins, several of them, were covered entirely, and they had to evacuate the people and lodge them elsewhere. On the west end, where the highway went through, it drifted into the Ideal Motel,
[00:14:00] I would say up to the eaves of the tourist cabins, pretty much.

The effects of the winter of '49 were felt in many ways. One of them is that the antelope loss in the Red Dessert they figured was about 80% of the antelope, which amounted to 7,000 antelope. The lamb crop, as a result of the storm, was just 50% of usual. When they shipped sheep in October, there was only 74 railroad cars of sheep, compared to 133 the year before. That was just some of the ... There was cattle involved, but the figures, I couldn't find any.

Speaker 1: So a lot of the ranchers suffered some pretty severe economic losses?

Dan: Right. Mainly, I think, in sheep. They just couldn't cope with the conditions.

Speaker 1: Right. Right. I also, as I've been talking to people, was really struck by the outreach that people in towns did to complete strangers that were stranded. Maybe the hotels filled up and people would take them into their homes.

Dan: Oh, yeah. I'm sure that that was the case. Of course, that wasn't in the paper. At the time, I don't remember any of it, [00:16:00] or anybody saying anything about it.

Speaker 1: And then there were stories about people's houses getting drifted in and snow in their attics. They'd warm up from below, their ceilings would cave in from the ... The snow would start melting and dripping through the ceiling, and it would start to cave in on themselves.

Dan: They were especially worried about when the snow melted that there were going to be floods. But it so worked out that the weather was such that the snow melted over a period of time, and there wasn't any flooding, which could have happened if the weather became warm and stayed warm. We didn't experience any flooding.

Speaker 1: I've been getting varied reports about whether it was a really unusually green spring in the spring and summer of '49, like it is this year. It's very green in Wyoming this year.

Dan: I would guess that with all the snow melting over a period of time, why it would. They don't ... As far as I know, they didn't have very many snow fences to back up the snow. But there was also a lesson learned, too, in the winter of '49, and especially on the north highway to Casper, Nine Mile Hill, just 9 miles from Rawlins. No matter what they did with a rotary snowplow or whatever it is, they would just plow a lane through the snow. Well, [00:18:00] before they got to the other end, snow was blowing in the tracks. They finally took a lot of equipment from the north highway and put it on Highway 30, which was closed from time to time, east and west, depending on the snow storm. As a result of this, why, what they tried to do ... Highway Department was trying to plow or conform the land on the lee side of the wind so that the snow would blow on rather than go in between the cuts.

Speaker 1: They probably continued that policy for a long time.

Dan: For a long time. They still do it, yeah. That and snow fences are about the only 2 ways they have to battle these. I don't think we'd have the trouble if they have all the snow fences that they have on I-80 now. I think there's more miles of snow fences than there are highway between here and Laramie.

Speaker 1: Anything else that you had for me? You've seen a lot of winters in Wyoming. Was '49 the worst in your memory, do you think?

Dan: Oh, yes, by far. I've never seen a period at all, or heard [00:20:00] of a period when school was out 3 different times in that period of time. In Rawlins, that had to be a pretty good blizzard in order for the schools to shut down. So no, I've never heard of anything anywhere near it.

Speaker 1: Kids must have had a fun time being out of school and playing in the snow.

Dan: Yeah. You know, they wouldn't hardly notice whether it was bad or not. I think they'd just enjoy themselves. It's the motorists and the people on the trains that are inconvenienced. Of course, the agriculture and the ranchers being so isolated. They even had to have an air drop to a coal mine just 7-1/2 miles south of Rawlins. They couldn't reach it otherwise, so they had an air drop of food.

Speaker 1: I heard that they went after a sheep herder with a Sherman tank. Did you run across that story?

Dan: I don't think that's right.

Speaker 1: You don't think so?

Dan: I don't think there were any Sherman tanks out here. Like I said, there were 17 Caterpillars operating out of here. Some of them were leased, or at least rented from private individual.

Speaker 1: By the military.

Dan: Well, whoever was doing the clearing. I don't know who paid for it. No Sherman tank, I'm sure.

Speaker 1: I may have gotten ... Somebody may have been exaggerating a little bit on that one.

Dan: Well, I would think if there was Sherman tank operating, [00:22:00] the newspaper would have certainly mentioned that.

Speaker 1: Right. Right.

Dan: But I didn't catch it if they did. The bulldozer seemed to be the machine that they used the most.

Speaker 1: Right. It was a coordinated Army effort led by General Pick. Truman said, go in there and dig out the west. I've heard that it was the biggest bulldozer operation in American history.

Dan: Well, I wouldn't doubt it.

Speaker 1: Not just Wyoming, but all the states that were affected.

Dan: All the states that were affected, right. I don't know whether ... I've heard you say that it was worse further east. I can't visualize it being worse. Yeah, I just can't do it.

Speaker 1: Lusk in western Nebraska, that area in there really took a hit. I saw pictures of 30-foot drifts, cuts through 30-foot drifts. It was remarkable. A guy standing on top of a '49 Ford with his arm in the air, and he wasn't anywhere near to the top of the drift.

Dan: That's what wind will do, in the conditions.

Speaker 1: I guess it was the other thing. Of course, Wyoming gets a lot of winter storms. But this one was simply just the longevity of it, blizzard after blizzard after blizzard blowing in.

Dan: That's right. There were times when the roads were open in between, and the railroad was open. Then it'd close again. A different set of people, different set of trains. I think they said that there was 17 trains in Rawlins yards at 1 time, 44 cars of hogs, and I think more than that [00:24:00] of cattle. But the cattle didn't die like the hogs did.

Speaker 1: Well, that's all I've got, if you don't have anything else.

Dan: No, no I don't.

Speaker 1: This is great. You did your homework, sir. Thanks for doing that for me.

Dan: Yeah. If you had something to copy this, why I've got ... I don't know whether you want it or need it, all the newspaper things through the period 01/04.

Speaker 1: You gave me clippings from before.

Dan: Yeah.

Speaker 1: Remember? Is this something ...

Dan: This is all the newspaper articles. You can take a look at that and see. I don't know whether you need to get anything out of that or not.

Speaker 1: You know, I ... I might Xerox these, Dan. I'll see if they have a machine here. Okay?

Dan: Yeah. You're welcome.

Speaker 1: We can cut copy.

Speaker 2: Okay.

Speaker 1: Go ahead.

Dan: Okay. There was an 85-year-old lady that was found dead in East Rawlins. Then after the storm was all over, and about the 28th of February, a man was killed when his bulldozer slid off of a snowbank. So that would be as a result of the 1949 snow blockade.

Speaker 1: Did the lady freeze to death?

Dan: Yes.

Speaker 1: In her home?

Dan: No. No. No. She was out. I guess, she was outside.

Speaker 1: And got disoriented perhaps?

Dan: Perhaps, yeah. Eighty-five [00:26:00] years old, who knows? Maybe she was just going somewhere and couldn't make it. You know, you can, in a blizzard, get lost in 20 feet. I hear some of the ranchers would tie a rope or something between their house and the barn so that they could find the barn.

Speaker 1: The winds were that ferocious and the snow was that blowing.

Dan: And disorienting to see the snow going whistling by. Right. Those are the only 2 deaths I know of.

Speaker 1: There were 16 total in Wyoming, and I'm tracking down ... There was an airplane crash. There were people that were found in their cars on the side of the road. Sixteen total, I think, for Wyoming.

Dan: Was it? Okay. None around here, was it?

Speaker 1: No. The bulldozer was around here, thought.

Dan: Oh, yeah.

Speaker 1: I heard that one. Yeah. It rolled over on him, right?

Dan: Yeah, it rolled over on him.

Speaker 1: Okay. We can cut.